

How to Find Your First Job

Many young designers find it hard to believe that they can make a living doing something they find compelling and interesting--something they love. Finding the right first job, even if it's a summer job or an internship, is not just an important step in launching your career. It is an exploration of the field and a continuation of the learning process. Even the most skilled designer finds the search for a first job stressful. The suggestions that follow can reduce that stress by providing an overview of the process.

Before you can begin your job search, you need to understand 1.) yourself: your motivations, strengths, and weaknesses; 2.) your work: its nature, style, and variety; and 3.) the job market: corporations, design offices, and the wide variety of other businesses that employ graphic designers. Then you can get ready to present yourself and your work in a portfolio.

To create a portfolio, select only your best work--the work you are proud of and want to discuss. Bearing in mind that people remember best what is first or last in a sequence, bind together sketches that show your ability to think, to sketch and to brainstorm. Meanwhile think about your strengths and weaknesses (we all have weaknesses), and prepare yourself to discuss them in an interview. Because your well-crafted, unique communications can take a beating when they are handled, safeguard your work. Shoot documentary slides of the work for your own record and for a slide portfolio to send to a distant location.

If your school provides courses or advisory sessions for assembling a portfolio and marketing yourself; take advantage of them. Show your portfolio to teachers and attend any portfolio reviews organized by local professional design organizations. Listen to the feedback you get. Identify special interests or characteristics that you bring to the work situation as well as what you would like to learn on your first job. You'll want to make clear to your prospective employer that you know learning continues throughout a career. In fact, the learning curve is particularly steep for the first two or three years after you finish school and should continue for the rest of your life.

Everyone looking for a job should have a résumé, but this document can be especially important to a design applicant. Your résumé deserves careful typographic design that reflects your type skill and ability. Remember to give the facts an employer wants to know as well as reliable address and telephone number. It is also a good idea to design and print stationery and business cards for yourself. They provide another opportunity to make an individual design statement. Any designer with whom you interview will appreciate the difficulty of designing this material. Designing for yourself is worse than representing a client; it can be like having an identity crisis.

The next step is to identify the design offices, corporations, or individuals with whom you'd like to interview. School placement offices usually have job leads of real value, and they cover the larger organizations that recruit for design positions. Trade magazines and design annuals in your school library are also good resources. If you want to work in a particular geographic location, look for help wanted listings there. Also scan your school's alumni lists for recent graduates in that city. Call them up and discuss your interests with them. Alumni know people in design and are often willing to help a recent graduate meet them. Looking for a job is a serious networking activity. This may be the first time you network, but it won't be the last.

Prospective employers often prefer to receive a brief letter and résumé before committing to an interview. If possible, use the letter to establish your interest relative to a particular job opening or to the organization's specialty. Give the reader of your letter a sense of who you are. Follow up with a telephone call to arrange an appointment. The person you are contacting is probably a busy professional, so don't be easily discouraged. Be politely persistent if you do not get an appointment immediately. Sometimes you will get an interview with someone who has no job openings but is still willing to meet with you. Take this "exploratory" interview. It will be excellent practice, and you may be more relaxed if your dream job is not on the line. What's more, this individual may help you make other connections.

The first interview is always the most stressful, so arrange mock interviews with friends to get practice and feedback. At the real interview, try to relax. Remember to breathe. If you don't see design work displayed, ask to see some. Ask questions about the organization and its projects. Be interested in them; then explain how you can help with their needs. Don't drone on about yourself; be attuned to the interviewer's verbal responses and body language. An interview, when it really works, is a dialogue between people who are sharing information and finding common ground. After any interview, always stop to record your impressions. A follow-up note of thanks will be appreciated as a courtesy and is a way to help interviewers remember you.

When you are offered a job, you may be taken by surprise and neglect to negotiate. Don't just blurt out a "yes." Employers will respect your taking time to consider the conditions of your employment. This is your opportunity to establish your market value as a designer. Figure out what it takes to live reasonably in the city under consideration, and don't forget your educational loans. Try to find out what entry-level design salaries are in that area, and balance that information against your personal strength as a designer. Remember, in addition to money, other things are negotiable, such as health benefits, paid vacations, unpaid leave days, starting date, flexible hours, or months to a performance review (and hopefully a raise). You can sacrifice some of these items for others that are more important to you. Be clear about the offer, ask questions, and take time to consider it. Try to adjust whatever is not satisfactory now. It is important to start off a relationship with clarity and trust. After you accept the position, celebrate but don't throw out your contacts. Send them a note announcing your new position.

Finding your first design job means matching your creativity and skill with an organization's real needs. It is also a valuable learning experience. While you are looking, you are learning about the various ways design is practiced. Your next job search--whether it occurs soon or well down the road--will be easier; you will have gained a clearer vision of the field and how you want to position yourself within it. Remember to communicate, to follow up, and to be courteous. That way, you'll take away from this first stressful experience some valuable information, increased confidence, and satisfaction.

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Edited by Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl
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